

The North Korean Positive Hero in *The People of the Fighting Village*

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Biographical Statement

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Abstract

This essay investigates the problem of the North Korean *positive hero* in Chon Se Bong's *The People of the Fighting Village* through an examination of the 1930s Soviet-Stalinist *socialist realist* arts doctrine as espoused by Stalin's cultural czar Andrei Zhdanov and Soviet writers Maxim Gorky and Alexander Fadeyev. The author in turn attempts to identify the compositional and social functions of Chon's protagonist, an ascetic partisan youth, to confirm his role as an exemplary *socialist realist positive hero*, who embodies the nationalist Stalinist ideals of North Korea during the Korean War.

Introduction

The People of the Fighting Village by Chon Se Bong (1915–1986) is a *socialist realist* heroic epic dressed up as a novelette that has apparently withstood the test of

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time in North Korea. It is a sentimental, stereotyped, and disturbing story set around October to December 1950 during the Korean War. The plot centers on two North Korean villages, Kaean and Kaebak, where peasant dwellers, in coordination with guerrilla partisans, struggle to oust an American occupation force. Notably, the original Korean edition, *Ssaunŭn Maul ŭi Saramdul*, was awarded third prize for the best prose work in 1953 at the Festival of the Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Korean People's Army ("Chun," 1955). Yet, despite the availability of two English-language editions published in 1955 and 1986, Chon's narrative has been neglected for half a century in the United States. This, however, does not represent a unique case — it is the fate of all North Korean literature accessible in North America. Having undergone arguably minor alterations and omissions, the translations of *The People of the Fighting Village* are important political-cultural documents. As both editions suggest, the work has evidently endured several decades of bureaucratic expedencies that condition the Stalinist arts doctrine of *socialist realism*, which North Korean sources describe as the only valid creative method and style in the country (*Korean*, 1959, p. 160; Chai and Hyon, 1980, p. 23). That doctrine is now termed "*Juche* realism" or "*Juche*-oriented realism." The apparent longevity and success of Chon's *The People of the Fighting Village* may be due in part to the characterization of the protagonist Kwon Yong Pil. Central to the tale, he is an ascetic partisan youth and archetypal *positive hero* molded as an exemplary representative of North Korean nationalist Stalinist ideals, and one who is to be emulated for his uncompromising perseverance, fortitude, and devotion to the North Korean fatherland/motherland.

Socialist Realism

Before exploring those qualities that define Kwon Yong Pil as a *positive hero*, it is necessary to address the question of *socialist realism*, which underlies his development. In brief, the Bonapartist aesthetic doctrine emerged in Soviet-Stalinist cultural discussion when Ivan Gronskey, chairman of the Organization Committee of the Soviet Writers' Union, introduced the term in 1932. The concept subsequently found its way into colonial-era Korea in 1933. Soon thereafter, it was promulgated and defined by Stalin's cultural lieutenant Andrei Zhdanov at the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934. And following the U.S.–Soviet agreements at Yalta and Potsdam, culminating in the occupation and division of the Korean peninsula with the defeat of fascist Japan in 1945, *socialist realism* became the veritable cultural "law" of the Soviet-sponsored northern regime in 1946. (That is also when the North Korean Federation of Literature and Art was established.) To be sure, North Korean literary control policy was thoroughly pervaded by Soviet-Stalinist influence from 1946 to 1950 and formed within the cultural-political structures of Zhdanovism and *socialist realism* (Lim, 1989). Other scholars such as Gabroussenko (2004), Howard (1996), Kwon (1991; 2003), Pihl (1977), and Pucek (1996) have confirmed the tradition of *socialist realism* in North Korea. Founded as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948, North Korea was formed during the height of Zhdanovism (Stalinist cul-

tural nationalism) in the Soviet Union, that is, during the blackout of Soviet art and letters that lasted from 1946 to 1953. This was a period that ushered in the notorious “anticosmopolitan campaign” (a euphemism for anti-Westernism and, to some extent, anti-Semitism) as well as the “theory of conflictlessness.” Both policies proved especially detrimental in cultural production, cutting off Soviet literature from international influences and rejecting conflict as an integral component of drama and character (Vickery, 1963, pp. 105–106, 111). This would partially explain what Brian Myers in his significant literary biography *Han Sörya and North Korean Literature* describes as the North Korean aversion to “dialectical conflict”—he stresses the Soviet concept of an overt generational “struggle of the old in the new” (Myers, 1994, p. 57). There is also the matter of the virtually undifferentiated and simplistically polarized character typologies he observes in North Korean fictional communities (p. 63).

After Stalin’s sudden death in 1953, the Soviet Union entered an era of tactically motivated bureaucratic self-reform and mass rehabilitations (so-called “de-Stalinization”) that coincided with the end of the Korean War (1950–1953). In reaction to this politically threatening turn of events, the old school Stalinists in North Korea remained ever-committed to their original policies of national autarky and heavy industrial development (Van Ree, 1989, pp. 61, 69; Scalapino and Lee, 1972, p. 504). As far as state-controlled art and literature are concerned, continued allegiance to the tactically unreformed Stalinist economic and political program seems to have translated into the retention of the high Zhdanovist form of *socialist realism* that was inherited in the mid-1940s and assimilated to serve the national interests of the North Korean regime. While Brian Myers contends that North Korean fiction is incompatible with *socialist realism*—he asserts very strongly that it failed—predominantly because of reductionist and populist appeals to Korean culture, tastes, traditions, values, and a glorification of *sobak ham* (benevolent naiveté; youthful innocence; emotional spontaneity), one finds that these are actually consonant with the demands of Zhdanovist nativism.

The fact of the matter is that the nationalist adaptation of *socialist realism* in North Korea is theoretically grounded in the Soviet-Stalinist cultural decrees of the 1930s—particularly, in the views of Andrei Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky, and Alexander Fadeyev. Even if these figures were not directly involved in North Korean political life, the preeminent roles they played as cultural horsemen of Stalinism would certainly have ensured the diffusion of their officially endorsed views into Soviet-liberated northern Korea. Zhdanov and Gorky established the repressive guiding principles of *socialist realism* at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934. Gorky had been highly esteemed by Korean writers in the 1920s and 1930s, and, in 1946, Han Sörya, the leading party-writer in North Korea, called for the making of a Korean Gorky (Myers, 1994, p. 45). As for Fadeyev, general-secretary of the Soviet Writers’ Union, he became the most celebrated Russian author in North Korea and was also a close friend of Han Sörya (p. 112). Fundamentally, the thought of Zhdanov, Gorky, and Fadeyev is premised on Stalin’s isolationist and nationalist theory of “socialism in one country.” Inherent to their virtually interchangeable perspectives are didacticism, ethnocentrism, populism, and party control.

An ignorant and brutal party bureaucrat, Zhdanov made the definitive statement on *socialist realism*, defining the literatures thereof in culturally chauvinistic terms and as categorically heroic, enthusiastic, and optimistic. Writers who would produce this sort of epic literature he called “engineers of human souls” (Zhdanov, 1950, p. 12). That phrase was later attributed to Stalin, and it would become an oft-used one by the all-powerful North Korean Stalinist leader Kim Il Sung. According to Zhdanov, the principal heroes of *socialist realism* are the builders of self-contained national-socialism. And the only permissible literature is one that is the political handmaiden of the state. Zhdanov’s views were subsequently elaborated in his infamous 1946 attack on the literary journals *Leningrad* and *Zvezda*. Exemplifying the fanaticism and intolerance of Stalinist arts doctrine, he condemned as decadent and shameful genuine writers who did not surrender themselves to the party line and ordered a ruthlessly glossed up moralism in literary works. Underscoring his views is a string of false nationalist-populist assertions, such as his saying that the ruling bureaucracy promotes what is in keeping with the tastes, tempers, and ethics of the Soviet people (p. 25). “Soviet literature lives and should live by the interests of the people, the interests of the motherland” (p. 40). Zhdanov’s decree that all literature is party literature and the following point are at the heart of North Korean *socialist realism*:

[T]he writer must educate the people and arm them ideologically. While selecting the best feelings and qualities of the Soviet man and revealing his tomorrow, we must at the same time show our people what they must not be, we must castigate the remnants of yesterday, remnants that hinder the Soviet people in their forward march. Soviet writers must help the people, the state, and the party to educate our youth to be cheerful and confident of their own strength, unafraid of any difficulties [p. 43].

Here, one should briefly note the fidelity to Zhdanovism that is evinced in the Maoist Chinese adaptation of *socialist realism*, which appears to have had a considerable influence on North Korean arts and literary doctrine in the 1960s and 1970s, during the height of the Sino-Soviet conflict. This, after all, is the decade when Kim Il Sung and his ruling guerrilla faction leaned closer to the Mao Zedong regime and when the North Korean “guerrilla tradition” in state politics and the arts, with all its Maoist resonances, was consolidated. Echoing the ultra-leftist utopianism of Zhdanov’s 1934 speech, Mao’s literary spokesman Zhou Yang said in 1952 that *socialist realist* literature is one that is “good at combining the reality of today with the ideals of tomorrow” (qtd. in Link, 2000, p. 109). When Mao himself made his open split with the Soviet Union, he declared that Soviet-style *socialist realism*—in the bureaucratic-reformist period of the de-Stalinization campaign that Nikita Khrushchev initiated—was inadequate and that literary works must “combine revolutionary realism and romanticism” (p. 114).

While the Maoists presented this as a new slogan, it was basically the same Stalinist *socialist realism* expounded by Zhdanov and Gorky in the Soviet 1930s, with the exception that the Maoist Chinese appropriation placed more emphasis on projecting “romantic” ideals into everyday life. That is to say, the positive heroes of Chi-

nese *socialist realism* would approach perfection even more closely than their Soviet counterparts (p. 114). Retrograde Maoist-Zhdanovist *socialist realism* would invariably have found its way into North Korea after the Korean War. The Chinese army had occupied the country for the duration of the conflict and for five years thereafter, that is, until 1958. In this period, Zhou Yang made his infamous address in China at the Second Congress of Literary and Arts Workers on 24 September 1953. Beijing and Pyongyang also established the joint Economic and Cultural Agreement in November of the same year. Pucek has noted that 1953 is when the history of Korean literature in North Korea began to be rewritten (1996, p. 56). As Zhdanovist encrustations were hardening in the Chinese *deformed workers' state*, post-Stalin Soviet literary policy changes were passed at the Second Soviet Writers' Congress in 1954. The epoch of Soviet tutelage in North Korea finally came to a close when Kim Il Sung delivered his anti-Soviet reformism *Juche* speech in 1955. (Chon Se Bong's *The People of the Fighting Village* may mark a historical transition point from Soviet *socialist realist* to Maoist *socialist realist* influence, but that subject exceeds the scope of this paper.)

Considering the politically misguided Gorky, in his friendship with the Soviet bureaucracy, he filled up the vacuoles of Zhdanovism with mythical cytoplasm. Proceeding along the same populist vein as Zhdanov, he invoked folklore and mythology at the 1934 Congress, basically arguing for the modern resuscitation of ancient tales and myths in Soviet literature in order to organize social life. For Gorky, mythology was synonymous with realism. He also believed that myths disposed people with a revolutionary consciousness:

Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery — that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add — completing the idea, by the logic of hypothesis — the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way [Gorky, 1977, p. 44].

With these romantic notions in mind, Gorky believed the Stalinist party-state to be a moral authority that was in the right not only to control literature, but also to educate “craftsmen of culture” and “engineers of the soul” (p. 67). Folklore and mythology, he reasoned, were suited for the pedagogical tasks of the Bonapartist regime because they were moralistic, devoid of pessimism, and created perfect heroes. The hero of *socialist realism* would be akin to the wise “simpleton” hero of folklore and exist as the literary personification of organized labor (pp. 36, 54). The enormous irony in all of this is that mythmaking derives from incomprehension, superstition, and religion. Furthermore, as Leon Trotsky says, a myth is an imaginary and false interpretation of the interconnection of natural phenomena and social institutions (Trotsky, 1998, p. 482). The Stalinist doctrine of *socialist realism* is thereby constructed to produce false, sacred, ritualistic narratives with a pantheon of immaculate heroes. The North Korean national adaptation of the doctrine diverges in no fundamental way from Gorky's romantic-nationalist misconceptions.

Regarding Fadeyev, some of his ideas may be found in a 1964 issue of the journal *Soviet Literature*, selections from 1932 to 1946, years spanning the birth of *socialist realism*, Stalin's Great Terror, and high Zhdanovism. In the authoritarian context of Stalinism, Fadeyev emphasizes that it is "*necessary* for every artist" to be a party spokesman (Fadeyev, 1964, p. 134). The central aim of *socialist realism*, he states, is to remold and educate people ideologically — that is, he should say, brainwash them. Furthermore, writers are obligated to master party ideology. He goes on to add that party policy is a "supreme and all-inclusive synthesis" and that everything must be "subordinated to a single guiding will and placed at the service of all-conquering [national] socialism" (pp. 138–139). This is followed by the vulgar reductionist idea that art is *dependent* on class expression (p. 141). It goes without saying that Fadeyev, in one of his more criminal moments, added fuel to the fire of the "anticosmopolitan campaign." In 1948, he initiated an attack against Russian critics who complained about the abysmal quality of party-sanctioned drama. As a loyal party mouthpiece wielding great political authority, he denounced these individuals as unpatriotic lackeys of the West (Vickery, 1964, pp. 106–107). Total subordination of literature to the party, political suppression of ideas, and valorization of populism and anti-foreignism — this is the essence of North Korean *socialist realism*.

As long as a national–Stalinist government exists in North Korea, its *socialist realist* literature is not contradicted by the fact that the regime has always placed greater emphasis on the national struggle — not class struggle — of Korea against foreign domination. This is a theme that goes back to the pre-liberation writings of purported founding father Kim Il Sung and which also appears in the present-day ethos of the ultranationalist *Juche* (national subjectivism) ideology. More to the point, *socialist realism* is a nationalist doctrine. Here, one merely need recall its deceptive slogan of "national in form and socialist in content." Even the pastoralism that Brian Myers identifies in North Korean fiction is not removed from Zhdanovism, since the pastoral reflects the nation's once-predominant peasant demographic and their rural existence — peasants constituted almost 75 percent of the North Korean population in 1945. This pastoralism is consistent with the main tenets of *socialist realism*: *partiinnost'* (party spirit), *narodnost'* (national character), and *ideinnost'* (ideological expression). Replete with references to farming, land, peasants, and rice, as well as nature imagery like mountains and rivers, *The People of the Fighting Village* confirms that it has fulfilled a major doctrinal requirement, namely, the demand for a peculiarly North Korean *narodnost'*. Fundamentally, the sociological equivalent of this *narodnost'* is found in the climate of upward social mobility for peasants in postcolonial North Korea and, especially, in the class composition of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). From its beginnings in 1946 as the North Korean Workers' Party, the WPK has been a "mass party" — not a revolutionary working-class party — with members of peasant background holding a solid majority. Furthermore, active recruitment of the party cadre had been undertaken among the rural, uneducated poor. In March 1948, on the threshold of the founding of North Korea as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in September, over half the party membership was poor peasant (Armstrong, 2003, pp. 108, 110).

Since literature in North Korea is produced in the totalitarian orbit of the WPK, it is no small accomplishment that Chon Se Bong's *The People of the Fighting Village*—presuming continuous domestic publication from 1955 to 1986—has witnessed thirty years of sociopolitical metamorphosis in the regime. These changes include: (1) the post-Korean War reconstruction, rehabilitation, and collectivization efforts; (2) the political purges of the 1950s that led to the unchallenged authority of Kim Il Sung; (3) the gradual consolidation of the *Juche* ideology and its attitude to art in the 1960s; (4) the official declaration of *Juche* and political independence from the Soviet Union and China in the 1970s; and (5) the ascension of Kim's son and heir, Kim Jong Il, in the 1980s. In a country where political-economic and administrative changes—something the structural ambiguities of *socialist realism* easily accommodate—cause writers to disappear from libraries, histories, and public life, one suspects that Chon, a member of the WPK and eventually chairman of the Central Committee of the Korean Writers' Union, was a talented enough toady for his work to survive the forbidding political landscape of North Korean *socialist realist* letters. But it should be noted that Kim Il Sung purged Chon in 1967 because he deemed the writer's 1966 novel *The New Hill with Flowing Fog* (*An'gae Hŭrŭnŭn Sae Ŏndŏk*) as "revisionist and bourgeois." Chon was nonetheless rehabilitated by Kim Jong Il, under whose patronage the party-writer was instructed to produce works extolling the postcolonial heroic legends of Kim Il Sung and the anti-Japanese guerilla struggle. Among these heroic epics is his 1973 novel *Dawn of the Revolution* (*Hyŏngmyŏng ŭi Yŏmyŏng*), which is about the youthful days of the North Korean leader (Kim, 2006, p. 180; "From," 2006).

Intellectual Physiognomies

Chon Se Bong is regarded in North Korea today as having played a pivotal role in the development of post-liberation national literature and a "new revolutionary literature," and he is best known for his postwar novel *New Spring at Sokgaeul Village* (*Sŏkkaeul ŭi Saebom*, 1957–1960) ("From," 2006). Although it is unclear whether he was a writer-correspondent in addition to being a guerrilla during the Korean War, his *The People of the Fighting Village* reportedly incorporates experiences with the Kowon partisan detachment during that conflict ("Brief," 1986; "Chun," 1955). Importantly, *The People of the Fighting Village* is not strictly a single-character heroic epic. Organized into episodic parts oscillating between protagonists and antagonists, and continually adding new characters to its narrative thread, the story explores its heroes (peasants and partisans) from the *inside*, whereas its villains (landlords, concubines, puppet police, American soldiers, South Korean troops) are described from the *outside*. In presenting an *inside picture* of the protagonists with an *inside knowledge* of their situation, Chon, however, is reluctant to differentiate the psychology of his peasant villagers (see italicized terms in Lukács, 1964). There is flatness and a general avoidance of intra-group conflict. Forming an interesting parallel to Brian Myers' description of North Korean writer Han Sŏrya's 1949 short story titled *Grow-*

ing Village (*Charanün Maül*) (Myers, 1994, p. 63), *The People of the Fighting Village* delineates highly polarized positive and negative fields for the over twenty-one characters who populate its pages. For instance, the majority of the peasants of Kaeon and Kaebak villages are all supporters of their government and People's Army. (One of Chon's justifications is that their sons and daughters are in the North Korean military.) But the one thing they lack is leadership in their struggle to overcome the aggressors who detain, loot, torture, and murder them.

Rendering the images of a paradise and a hell through "temporal contrast" (p. 57), Chon Se Bong makes nostalgic references to the golden days since the 1945 liberation and the North Korean government's "just and correct [agrarian] policy," which brought five years of "great happiness" and a "joyous and cheerful life [...] that went on like a grand feast" (Chon, 1986, pp. 13, 83–84). Against this folksy romantic imagery, Chon juxtaposes the slaughterous American invasion and rightwing opportunism of those North Koreans who support imperialism and colonial slavery. Thereupon, everyone who is an invader, a collaborator, and a fence-sitter is categorically placed in the aforesaid negative field, including "reformable" outsiders such as the characters Widow Pak, her son Hak Bin, and Sin Yong Sul, all of whom are criticized for their self-serving dispositions. Yet, what becomes obvious in the course of the narrative is that the fate of these "reformables" is predestined, to some extent, by their social-class background. Widow Pak and her son are of peasant stock and, therefore, potentially good. But Sin Yong Sul, a past timber dealer and foreman of a colonial-era Japanese farm, is a "greedy and honey-tongued" moneymaker and permanently malignant (p. 49). Thus, following the murder of the hero Kwon Yong Pil's mother and his sister Yong Sun — a major turning point in the narrative — Widow Pak and Hak Bin, who witness this atrocity, are converted to the positive field, while Sin conveniently drifts further into the negative camp and aids the enemy.

Concerning the characterization of Chon's antagonists as a whole, there is barely any attempt to develop them. From the outset, they are all generally termed "bastards," "devils," "dogs," and "wolves," monstrosities whose fundamental nature is inhuman and supposedly un-Korean. And simply described as "Yanks," the American soldiers are portrayed as a mass of faceless killers and rapists who are reduced to racial caricature: big feet, long legs, hairy hands, big noses, and drunkenness. The following statements are two cases in point: "Watch out [for] the Big Nose! He is a veritable devil! Especially when it comes to women!" (p. 20) and "[S]everal long-legged villains were hurling themselves upon a young woman in a yellow coat" (p. 35). While the only American among these anonyms to be named is the mysterious, sadistic, and quasi-religious Commander John, he also does not escape the conveniently abstract bestial imagery. In one significant case, he is described as a "viper walking upright" (p. 81). The image is apt for the character. Nevertheless, Chon's literary generalizations really amount to cartoons and schematic crudities. Consequently, these weaknesses of portrayal create an ideologically false social universe — regardless of the indisputably real war crimes and atrocities documented therein — into which the North Korean *positive hero* Kwon Yong Pil is placed to guide the peasant masses.

With regard to Korean villains in particular, this falseness is confirmed by the fact that before the Korean War, the WPK rank-and-file had been recruited in peacetime and lacked any prior revolutionary experience. Thus, after the repulsion of the Korean People's Army from the South and with the ensuing American invasion of the North, a majority of the party members—even army commanders—fled or hid as enemy troops advanced into their localities. Some would throw away their membership cards while others became collaborators. Further complicating the matter is that members of then-opposition political parties joined the American-sponsored South Korean army and helped ferret out the WPK cadre. These circumstances caused the ruling party to disintegrate and placed the North Korean regime on the brink of collapse by October 1950 (Nam, 1974, p. 86). The tide turned when China under the leadership of Mao Zedong dispatched a massive military contingent that eventually took control of the war. Needless to say, it would make for greater *novelistic realism* (see Bakhtin, 1981) and more interesting reading if Chon could incorporate the actual political and socio-psychological complexities of the war—ramshackle party discipline, poor ideological training, cowardice, defections, incompetence—into the social universe and intellectual physiognomies of *The People of the Fighting Village*. But these things, which could lead to rational explanations behind the actions of the antagonists, are completely sifted out. In their place are the dualistic moral abstractions that characterize the whole of Chon's polarized narrative cosmos.

Of all the figures in the negative field, the landlord Sin Chi Gyo is the most prominent. By no means, however, is his intellectual physiognomy on par with that prominence. His lack of texture and plasticity are spelled out in the usual obvious phrases. He is a "village hooligan," a "cunning greedy man," "mean and base by nature," and known among the villagers as "Dog Hunter Sin" (Chon, 1986, p. 5). He is thin and tall with close cropped hair, perhaps like one of Chon's American soldiers with a crew cut. A dandy, Sin wears fine clothes, sunglasses, a felt hat, and carries a cane with an ivory handle—which he uses to beat people with! A man of low birth, he made his fortune in usury and became a landowner. Other character traits that flow from his background are a cutthroat opportunism and catlike shrewdness. Not surprisingly, Sin immediately curries favor with the American and South Korean forces when they arrive at Kaebak village. He eventually gives his concubine, Sin Ok Hwa, to Commander John and promises women to the South Korean interpreter, Major Pak Il Yong. Earning the good graces of the Americans, Sin subsequently authors the death of his longtime political rival, landlord Hwang Dal Hun, and the man's younger brother, Hwang Dal Gi. Sin's viciousness is so pronounced that not even the members of his U.S. military-sponsored police force respect him. In one scene, when he is absent, the men mock their boss for his self-importance, hacking cough, and tiny nostrils, which are compared to "a muzzle of a dog" (p. 64). Sin probably stands as the most vile, self-absorbed, and ruthless character in Chon's narrative. A collaborator and national traitor, he also bears responsibility for the mass murder of innocent peasants whose tragic deaths satisfy Commander John's anti-communist bloodlust.

In light of his portrayal, Sin Chi Gyo emerges as the negative expression of the

positive hero and enables the development of a crucial subplot to justify the actions carried out in Kwon Yong Pil's "master plot." Sin centers as such a central antagonist in *The People of the Fighting Village* that he even tends to displace Commander John. What is soon revealed is that unlike a *positive hero*, Sin is unable to see beyond his *individual desires* and *immediate goals*, believing naively that American imperialism simply intends to return state-confiscated and redistributed land to the North Korean rural bourgeoisie. Interestingly, that delusion is challenged in two important conversations with Major Pak, who divulges intelligence about United States military operations in Korea:

Pak went on to explain the Malthusian theory. He concluded by saying that the Malthusian theory became a backward one today in point of methods. Therefore, for creating a new era on the earth, the United States discovered a more superior and bolder way — the atomic bomb. The United States will solve the difficult questions with the atomic bomb. Today the "Republic of Korea" is earmarked as a testing ground for the atomic bomb. Though they have not used it, he emphasized, it would be advantageous both to the USA and the "Republic of Korea" in creating a new era for mankind, provided the results are the equivalent to the atomic bomb [p. 28].

General Douglas MacArthur's notorious proposal to drop thirty to fifty nuclear bombs on China and North Korea is well-known in the history of the Korean War. Sin is shocked to hear this. Nevertheless, the thought soon escapes him. Such is also the case later in the heroic epic when he asks Major Pak to settle down in North Korea and become a landlord. Disgusted by the thought, the interpreter condemns Korea as a land of "stink and filth," opting instead for New York or San Francisco. He adds that the country will likely be transformed into a wasteland and return to a primordial age of dense forests and wild beasts. A misanthrope and something of a Social Darwinist, Pak subsequently explains that "the evil instinct of man [...] the evil instinct to struggle for existence [...] worries the Americans. But now the Americans have started ... mankind like a swarm of ants will be wiped off the face of the earth, to our relief" (p. 69). Pak seems to suggest that it is the Korean struggle and the Korean people on the Northeast Asian peninsula that will be annihilated for the better. These racist views, which Pak has internalized and which underlie the invasion of Korea, ultimately remain incomprehensible to Sin Chi Gyo. Without any self-reflection or internal contradiction, he continues to collaborate with the American military. Sin's incapacity to understand is clearly bound up with his pre-liberation history as a usurer and landowner, with all the attendant habits sanctioned by his social class. But Chon Se Bong's illustration of this villain, in all his two-dimensionality, lacks authenticity.

While Sin Chi Gyo stands as the prime villain in *The People of the Fighting Village*, the most indispensable protagonist — after the *positive hero* — is the forty-five-year-old peasant Choe Chi Bu, whom the reader finds in the opening of the heroic epic. Here, it is well to ask why Choe is not the central positive figure. There are a number of factors against him. Following the logic of Chon's narration and description, the *socialist realist positive hero* is a nationalist allegory for the future, and youth-

fulness, in this particular case, serves that symbolic function. Moreover, though he plays a progressive role in the sequence of events, Choe is neither a party member nor is he a partisan. Although not typologically positive enough, he does manage to embody elemental characteristics of the *positive hero*. For instance, at the beginning of the story, as he reflects pensively on his eldest son in the People's Army and on his recently dead wife, he suddenly says: "Drat it! This is no time to give way to emotion" (p. 1). Another elemental characteristic is found when he admonishes the model peasant Kye Dok Gun for his hardheaded capriciousness: "You're just dull like a bull. The bull may be justified in its own way, but man must use his wits" (p. 32).

These markedly intentional emphases on emotional control (asceticism/stoicism) and wits (intellect) bring into question the categoricalness of Brian Myers' observation that *sobak ham* (benevolent naiveté; youthful innocence; emotional spontaneity) is the cornerstone of the North Korean literary hero (Myers, 1994, pp. 59, 95). Another apparent departure from this notion is seen when Chon is apprehended by American soldiers and, used as an example for the peasants, is beaten by Sin Chi Gyo's thugs. In spite of the wounds inflicted on him, Choe musters his strength, finds support on a pillar, and declares: "No matter what torture you may try ... you get nothing except the blood of my body." Turning to the villagers, he says, "Stand firm! Like this pillar. You know, my friends, our pillar is still firm." Finally, "Even though we may perish, our pillar is an iron one. No one can raze it.... Friends! Look at me! Is it not true?" As the enraged peasants glower, Choe clenches his fist in an attempt to "control his boiling passion" (Chon, 1986, p. 45). Choe uses the expression "pillar" as a codeword for "people's power," and his clenched fist communicates a sense of self-control and patient perseverance. Choe Chi Bu is a lower and imperfect manifestation of the positive ideal in Chon's literary landscape. As such, the character cannot lead the peasant masses, but he can certainly reassure them that help is on the way.

Perhaps it is worth noting that despite the abovementioned appeal to intellect, one is hard put to find its genuine realization in *The People of the Fighting Village*. While emotional spontaneity is not presented as a desirous attribute, it is also evident that reference to "wits" conforms less to advanced theoretical ability than it does to strategic-tactical thinking and to a pragmatic commonsense outlook. Indeed, the heroic epic does not place *truly* intellectual demands on its characters or, for that matter, the reader. The plot embodies less the unfolding of a critical consciousness than it does a military logic and mindset. Against all of this, too much *sobak ham* is an evidently unconstructive sentiment for Chon's protagonists. Affecting the ability to function optimally for the sake of the "fatherland," *sobak ham* assumes the undesirable form of personal weakness, notably, in characters such as model peasant Kye Dok Gun and even the female partisan Buk Byol (Choe's daughter and Kwon's fiancée). That sentiment must be overcome at all costs in their social universe.

Positive Hero

The literary manifestation of an ultra-utilitarian aesthetic, Kwon is a fabricated hero, a prescribed type, and the instrument of party policy whom Chon renders in attractive and uncomplicated form: he is young; he is engaged to be married; he is a hard worker; he can control his emotions; he is an organizer; he is a partisan; he becomes a platoon commander; and he is a party member. Moreover, under the traumatic conditions of imperialist war, he champions the certainty of a victorious future. Interestingly, Brian Myers says that “the heroes of the Korean battlefield never lose their infantile willfulness” (Myers, 1994, p. 106). That is to say, they retain the naive and spontaneous qualities of little children. But Chon’s Kwon Yong Pil is anything but infantilized. His youth and exuberance aside, he is rather stoic and there remains a certain adulthood about him. There also seems to be a generally muted expression of *sobak ham* that finds its way into Kwon’s characterization. Kwon, who is almost too good to be true, stands as the moral exemplar and backbone of *The People of the Fighting Village*, the narrative of which evinces all the dramatic constants of *socialist realist* writing, which Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., describes as follows:

There is the political hero—tough, dedicated, self-controlled; there is the enemy—faceless, heartless, beyond the reach of pity or understanding; there are the masses—powerful, blind, long-suffering, requiring leadership, protection, and indoctrination; and there is the central dramatic design—the sorely tried leader, hemmed in by the demands of public policy, by personal privation, and set off by the solitude of leadership, summoning the resources in himself and in others to accomplish the task he believes history has set for him [Mathewson, 1975, p. 190].

The People of the Fighting Village satisfies all these constants. Kwon Yong Pil is playing both roles of political hero and tried leader. But to comprehend Kwon as a *positive hero* more technically, or, narratologically, one may turn to an instructive passage in Régine Robin’s Bakhtinian study titled *Socialist Realism*:

The novels of socialist realism and their chief protagonist, the positive hero, the new man, thus obey multiple narrative and actantial constraints. The hero is caught up in a stereotypical plot [...]. He takes on not only the euphorizing character of the title and the ending, but the five nodal vectors of monosemy and ideological clarity [Robin, 1992, pp. 281–282].

These five nodal vectors include (1) relations of actants arising from reflexive action, from symmetrical action, from transitive action; (2) transmission of competences taking precedence over blind action; (3) initial competence tending toward its own actualization; (4) clear definition of the task to be accomplished; (5) collective social being taking precedence over individual psychological being. (Actants consist of fictional genre-related characters and/or particular forces that determine the direction of narrative action.) Robin explains further:

Equipped with his will to act and his progressively acquired (or previously acquired) know-how, he [the *positive hero*] has to be able to convince, to undo the appearances of the smooth talkers, in order to bring into the open the authentic language of being, the truth. Furthermore, he has to be able to maintain a very

precise discursive position within fiction, that of the political line [1992, pp. 281–282].

Chon's heroic epic is faithful to Robin's general but completely accurate formulation. In addition, "[a]s a hero of mastery, clarity, monologism, homogeneity, and univocity, the positive hero must perhaps, in order to be understood, be grasped not in terms of his *fictional constraints* but in terms of his *functional constraints*" (p. 295). The partisan youth is, indeed, constrained in his function in the design of the text. Here, it may be helpful to turn directly to Régine Robin's literary mentor, Mikhail Bakhtin, who in his interesting *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* spells out the process behind the image of the *positive hero* prior to Stalinist *socialist realism*. Bakhtin takes the position of the author as a constitutive aspect in the production of literary form, and explains that the hero is constructed in an objective authorial world. Herein are "finalizing definitions" that require a rigid framework, a monologic design, with a "fixed eternal position" and "fixed authorial field of vision." The hero's self-consciousness is placed in this basic conceptual structure, ever-remaining part of the authorial consciousness that defines and represents him. There is no freedom and independence of character in the design:

[T]he hero is closed and his semantic boundaries strictly defined: he acts, experiences, thinks, and is conscious within the limits of what he is, that is within the limits of his image defined as reality; he cannot cease to be himself, that is, he cannot exceed the limits of his own character, typicality or temperament without violating the author's monologic design concerning him [Bakhtin, 1984, p. 52].

Although Bakhtin is writing in a pre-Stalinist period and not talking about *socialist realism*, his point, taken in the negative sense, is pertinent to the subjectivist *socialist realist* text and the immaculate *positive hero* who inhabits its disingenuous epic reality. Despite his moral and political strength, one cannot but suspect that too much is being demanded of a character such as Kwon Yong Pil. He has to stretch to a breaking point, thematically, compositionally, and socially. Evidently, this seems to be something that Chon Se Bong the author takes into some, albeit superficial, consideration when in the course of Kwon's reconnaissance mission to Kaebak village, the partisan, as mentioned earlier, witnesses his mother and little sister being burned alive by American soldiers. With the horrific scene before him, he convulses, instinctively grabs his revolver, and leaps over a fence behind which he has lain. Just then, the purpose of his mission bears down on him: "He was not allowed to come out in public" (Chon, 1986, p. 57).

The guerrilla resistance of which Kwon is part, and which is directed by the party, dictates his social existence. And especially in a time of imperialist war, there is no room for personal choices about family, only decisions within the context of the party's instructions for the greater social cause. Thus, when spontaneous emotions and personal feelings overcome him, Kwon must consciously subordinate these to the power of his will. Condemning the American "butchers" for the atrocious crime they have committed, he promises vengeance and breaks out in a cold, profuse sweat — an indication of his extreme psychological agitation. Later in the eve-

ning, Kwon attends a secret meeting with the villagers, and his wrenching emotions fill the atmosphere of the occasion. He wipes sweat off his brow and is determined to “maintain his indomitable attitude and instill into the peasants the unbreakable conviction of victory” (p. 59). It is stated that he is reaching a point where his nerves are ready to snap. Further symptoms of this imminent possibility are provided when Kwon touches on the issue of personal sacrifice in his speech to the self-serving Sin Yong Sul:

“Old Brother, I saw with my eyes my mother and sister being killed,” continued Kwon. “Their last cries for me penetrated me to the marrow. Needless to say my mother and sister are dear to me and precious and their lives are priceless. But no matter how frenzied the enemy becomes or to what outrageous means they may resort in their attempt to make us surrender, we’ll never bow down. We’re not that kind! The more atrocious they become, the more furious our indignation ... we ... throw flames into their throats . . . or thrust daggers into their hearts up to the hilt....” Kwon was panting for breath and faltered in spite of himself. The air in the room was as heavy as lead [p. 61].

The pressure is building up, but Kwon feigns aloofness and discusses with the peasants throughout the night. Leaving the village in the morning, he comes across the smoldering ruins of the house in which his mother and sister were burned alive. There, he is finally overwhelmed by uncontrollable tears; he collapses into the hot ashes; and he condemns himself as a worthless son and brother, a “cursed creature,” an “ingrate,” and a “devil.” The choice of words is devastating because, up until this point, “devil” is explicitly reserved for the faceless American soldiers. The reader has anticipated this nervous breakdown since Chon has made no attempt to evade the physiological fact of human emotions: “[M]an cannot easily control the flow of his feelings,” says the narrator (p. 79). But the author never probes deeper into that part of Kwon’s inner life which is beyond physiological drives. While physiology constitutes the basis of the higher functions of human thought, it is the task of the genuine artist-writer to read the “secret code” contained in the psychic substratum of *social man* and *social woman*. Perhaps, as a party-minded WPK writer, Chon considers that a demoralized and/or a demoralizing thing to do. The point of Stalinist *socialist realism*, after all, is not to create real people, but virtuous immaculate heroes.

Accordingly, Chon provides the most cursory outlines of his protagonists’ spiritual crisis and subconscious tectonic shifts. Why this is not taken further is possibly explained by the three functions the *positive hero* performs for the reader: “[H]e will inspire him to emulation, he will earn his respect as an admirable representative of political virtue, and he will, by linking the present with the future, provide magic assurance that the job can be done” (Mathewson, 1975, p. 228). In other words, if Kwon is to be emulated for his textbook-like virtues, he cannot be described as alone, deprived, and pitiful — all of which one knows he should be. Curiously, Brian Myers says that a typical North Korean protagonist is conceived not so much to inspire *emulation* as to elicit *emotional identification* (Myers, 1994, p. 70). Firstly, this does not cohere with *socialist realism*. Secondly, the distinction is arbitrary because *emulation*, by necessity, presupposes *emotional identification*. Basically, the North

Korean *positive hero* has to elicit an emotional response in the reader so that his or her literary virtues can be internalized and manifested in real social life.

In the hands of the party writer, the *positive hero* is obligated to overcome his crises at all costs. The exclusion of his inner life is determined by the social contract into which the character is bound: collective “social being” mechanically takes precedence over individual “psychological being,” and he will not allow himself to be weakened by the demons in his brain (Robin, 1992, p. 264). Thus, despite the intense guilt and frustration that emerge from his emotional suppression, Kwon Yong Pil rationalizes his situation accordingly: “Yong Sun, I’m not only the son of my mother. And not only your brother ... I must fight for more mothers and more sisters, for the beloved motherland ... understand me? I swear I’ll take vengeance ... on the enemy” (Chon, 1986, p. 63). Under such fictional and functional strictures, the only option Kwon has is to consciously channel his guilt, rage, and sadness, into the most volcanic, but rational, sense of justice he can permit himself.

The didactic, nationalistic, and retributive value of Kwon is so pronounced that he is, from the start, constructed as an educative patriotic model to inspire heroism and faith in an invaded people during a wartime situation. This is such a predominating, overriding function of his narrow nationalist character that, revealingly, not a single reference to “socialism” is made in the entirety of *The People of the Fighting Village*. The myopic didacticism is all the more evident when Kwon returns to the partisan encampment in the mountains and his commander asks him to report on the damage sustained at Kaebak village. While the partisan youth recalls the atrocious deaths of his loved ones, his duty compels him to describe events objectively. He states that over forty civilians were massacred and that these casualties should not be dwelled on. Subsequently, an article is printed in the partisan newspaper praising Kwon because “he restrained personal feeling in face of his solemn duty and had fought heroically” (p. 81). Following this episode, there is no indication that Kwon’s painful emotions subside. Rather, he distracts himself with agricultural labor. All the while, his will remains cast in iron and his furies are preserved for future use. On the fictional level, *socialist realism* predicates that everyone has the unconscious potential to perform those actions which come naturally to the *positive hero*. They need only become conscious of their own competence (Robin, 1992, p. 264). All of this is worked into the narrative of *The People of the Fighting Village* as a fundamental lesson, and most evidently for Kwon Yong Pil’s fiancée Buk Byol, when he finds her lamenting over his tragic personal loss. Speaking as lovers and comrades-in-arms:

“You weakling, what’s the good of tears? Didn’t I say so just now?” Yong Pil approached her and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

“I know your heart. No use to hide your feelings. I know in what way the devils killed your sister and mother.... I’m weeping from dejection, do you think? No, from indignation. How can I bear it?” Buk Byol said, shaking her shoulders.

“Don’t let such words escape your lips. I have not the slightest idea of putting my wrath into words. Only one thing for me. I’m prepared to redeem my solemn pledge to fight for the fatherland and our people.” His voice trembled with excitement [Chon, 1986, pp. 94–95].

Kwon Yong Pil's extraordinary, almost preternatural, self-renunciation brings to mind the words of the classical Marxist literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky, who identifies a peculiar kind of "pantheism" in Maxim Gorky's literary characters. This is a pantheism "of life in the collective and through the collective. Mankind, and not man — this is the focus of life. Humanity of the future — this is the god to which man must bow down and pray." Moreover, the absence of the element "I" deprives the hero of a genuine sense of truth (Voronsky, 1998, pp. 6, 8). As the moral-political pillar and compass of *The People of the Fighting Village*, Kwon Yong Pil establishes a path of collective national action, certainty, and hope, and with him the future is ensured despite the trials and privations of the Korean War. Predictably, the purpose he serves culminates in his fiancée's modeling after him, in the unrelenting fortitude of the peasants' struggle, and, above all, in the strategically and tactically flawless liberation of Kaean and Kaebak villages. Finally, Chon Se Bong's devilish Americans and national traitors are blown up, shot, bayoneted, and beaten to death by partisans and peasants alike. Justice has been served, but it is a rather formulaic and colorless sort of justice. One feels that he or she has been walked through a manual dressed up as a blockbuster — flat, stereotyped, and resounding with storm and thunder.

Conclusion

The ascetic positive personality of Kwon Yong Pil has a fixed metaphysical essence. He is smoothed over, generally knows no doubts, and there is no genuine contradiction in him. His determination is immutable and it never wavers. As a character, he is neither disorganized nor confused, though he does artificially break down, but only once. What is observable here is that the *positive hero's* blindness of purpose is his party-oriented author's blinding self-censorship. Notwithstanding the crude "universal pantheistic sensation" into which Kwon is immersed, Chon Se Bong's clichés and contrivances in *The People of the Fighting Village* are illustrative of something particularly important. That is, the objective significance of the nationalist heroic epic may be found not so much in what it tells the reader about real people and real occurrences in North Korea during the brutal Korean War, but about the official literary preferences, tastes, and policy orientation of the all-powerful North Korean bureaucracy. When art is controlled by politics and the dictums of *socialist realism*, but endures the vagaries of a Stalinist political regime, that propagandistic artistic creation has expressed what is categorical and timeless in the ruling political ideas of such a regime. Even if these are simultaneously heroic and reactionary national-Stalinist ideas, the *positive hero* Kwon Yong Pil is most probably their successful embodiment. What, however, are the implications of Chon Se Bong's "nov-lette" and his *socialist realist positive hero* in North Korea today? Would the programmatic orientation and nationalist outlook the guerrilla partisan youth embodies be relevant when the Pyongyang regime is now in the inexorable process of capitalist restoration and when the army has superseded the authority of the party in accor-

dance with Kim Jong Il's *Songun* (military-first) doctrine? *The People of the Fighting Village* might not be mentioned in recent English-language *Korean Central News Agency* articles or *Korea Today* journal. But given Chon's canonical status and the fact that his narrative is so militaristically invested and makes no reference to socialism, the work may still have its political-literary uses in the post-Kim Il Sung era.

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